

Dr. King Put Selma, Ala., on the Map With Protest Marches

*Ninth of 10 installments from
"The Days of Martin Luther
King Jr."*

By Jim Bishop

Director J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI had begun to inquire into the activities of Martin Luther King when the pastor first became involved in the civil rights movement. His men had reported there were leftists and former Communists in the pastor's entourage, and this had led to an order for wiretapping. The trouble with sophisticated eavesdropping is that not only does it capture and parrot the desired material, but it also bags everything including the whispered mouthings in a motel room. The private life of King, licentious or not, was not proper material for the electronic bugs, but they picked up his most personal words and deeds. Had Director Hoover been selective, he might have eliminated all except pertinent material from his top secret reports; but Hoover chose not to be selective, and highly personal material was included with political digests which were sent to Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, President Lyndon B. Johnson, and Speaker of the House John McCormack.

On Nov. 18, 1964, J. Edgar Hoover was holding a press conference for women journalists. Someone mentioned civil rights and Martin Luther King. The man with the ruddy bulldog face took a breath and referred to King as "the most notorious liar in the country." It was hardly a diplomatic statement.

The explosion hit the White House and rocked it. The newly announced winner of the Nobel Peace

Prize had been attacked by the Holy of Holies of Justice. No one can doubt that the Johnson administration tried to get Hoover to retract, or restate, or dilute the seven words, but Mr. Hoover was an immovable force.

The words reached Dr. King, who dropped his Nobel speeches to devise a statement in rebuttal. "I am appalled and surprised," the pastor said to reporters. "What motivated such an irresponsible accusation is a mystery to me."

King then did two wrong things: First, he told the press that Hoover's statement sadly must be the result of "extreme pressure. He has apparently faltered under the awesome burdens, complexities and responsibilities of his office. Therefore, I cannot engage in a public debate with him." Then he asked for an ap-

pointment with Hoover to discuss the matter.

A message went out that Hoover would meet King in his Washington office on Dec. 4. King thought that the FBI director was irritated solely because of what he had said in Georgia concerning the fact that Southern FBI agents were Southern in sentiment. He did not know about the wiretapping.

The talk lasted for only a short while—the director imperious and mysterious, the doctor puzzled and ill at ease. King left without a farewell handshake.

The animosity of J. Edgar Hoover directed itself more to the personal life of Dr. King than to his public existence.

The director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose men manned the King taps, learned nothing which could threaten the internal security of the nation.

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Selma, Ala., was under a black siege. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had been in



Associated Press

On the second day of the march to Montgomery, Dr. King nurses his sore feet.

Selma for eighteen months. Slowly, steadily, inexorably, they had worked the blacks upward from passivity to activity. They were slow to respond—they had seen what the sheriff and his men had done to people who wanted to register to vote. They saw Jim Clark as a soft-spoken man who could break your head in half. He was bad trouble smiling.

Jan. 2, 1965, was cold and clear. Saturday afternoon, no one was working. Two cars came in from Montgom-

ery, went to Brown's Chapel AME Church and stopped. Martin Luther King got out. Dr. King and his party hurried inside the church to the standing applause of 700 blacks. Selma's time had come.

The dangerous division in Selma was not just black versus white; it was black versus black and white versus white. SNCC was determined not to permit Dr. King to walk into town at whim, order "thousands" to be prepared to go to jail, and then, having lit the fuse hurry out of town.

SNCC had done the spadework, and SNCC was going to lead the demonstrations. On the white side, Mayor Joe Smitherman did not like the provocative tactics of the sheriff, so he appointed a moderate man, Wilson Baker, as chief of police.

This put the white structure in the position of having Baker, as chief of police of Selma, willing to discuss matters with the blacks, and Jim Clark, as sheriff of Dallas County, with Selma as the county seat, prepared to herd the blacks back into "Colored Town."

When the first large group of demonstrators appeared on the courthouse steps to register, Clark stood on the top step, held his hands out for silence, and barked: "You are here to cause trouble. That's what you are doing." He started at Hosea Williams in front. "You are an agitator, and that is the lowest form of humanity. If you do not disperse or go in as I direct you, you will be under arrest for unlawful assembly."

He pointed to a side door in an alley. "The line forms there," he said. No one moved. Jim Clark went down the County Courthouse steps alone, thrashing and hitting with his nightstick. The demonstrators left.

The county authorities announced that the voting registrars met once every two weeks, but that when they met, no blacks were waiting outside the courthouse. The blacks responded by demanding that the registrars meet more frequently. On Jan. 30, a Saturday, Martin Luther King let it be known to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Washington that he planned to march to the courthouse on Monday; this, in turn, would probably mean arrest and jailing.

The march started late on Monday morning. King and Ralph Abernathy led 770 marchers. It was Police Chief Wilson Baker who herded the blacks into jail. An additional 700, including

King and Abernathy, were arrested that day. The next day 500 more were jailed. Dr. King was getting the white man to play the King gambit: stuff the jails until they were unstuffable.

It is certain that the sheriff did not know that, in his crude way, he scored more for the cause of civil rights than most workers for the Movement. Clark had aroused the wait-and-see blacks. On Feb. 10, the sheriff and his deputies encircled 165 demonstrating children and marched and trotted them out of town into the farm country. Some, who could not keep the pace, were prodded from behind by chuckling deputies. "You kids want to march," one said, "we'll give you a good march." The children's march brought maddened parents into the streets.

Dr. King went to Washington to ask the administration for a strong voting rights law. He didn't request a strong voting rights law; he demanded one. Vice President Humphrey assured him that President Johnson already had one "in the works."

King came back from Washington to say something which, if it had come from the lips of Malcolm X, would not have surprised anyone. "Selma will never get right and Dallas County will never get right," he shouted, "until we get rid of Jim Clark." "Rid" held a connotation of death.

Clark collapsed and was taken to a hospital. One doctor said, "A mild coronary." Another said, "Total exhaustion." The SCLC did what it could. It sent 200 schoolchildren to kneel in front of the courthouse and pray for the recovery of the sheriff "in mind and body."

Dr. King announced in early March that the people would march from Selma to Alabama's capital city of Montgomery — fifty-four miles. They would bring their case before Gov. George Wallace.

Late Sunday morning, King and Abernathy preached sermons in their respective Atlanta churches as SNCC and SCLC field officers in Selma rapped on doors and entreated people to assemble for the march. At last, there were 500 per-

sons assembled.

A policeman in a car left the scene and drove to the Pettus Bridge. "They're on their way!" he shouted. Men mounted their horses. Troopers on the far side of the bridge adjusted gas masks. On the near side of the bridge, the recovered Sheriff Clark and his deputies, equipped with clubs and electric cattle prods, stood aside to let the marchers pass. White Selma, men, women, and little children, fringed both ends of the bridge, waiting with suppressed excitement as crowds once had waited at hangings in England.

The desultory little band marched to the bridge, and climbed the span slowly, listening to the venomous epithets of the white citizens.

At the top of the span, the marchers saw the state troopers ahead. Maj. John Cloud brought a bullhorn to his lips. "Turn about," he said loudly and slowly, "turn about and go back to your church." The people kept marching. "You will not be allowed to march any further. You have two minutes to disperse!"

Hosea Williams of the SCLC was indecisive. He wanted to salvage something from the situation. "May we have a word with the major?" he shouted.

A minute passed, then more than a minute. "There is no word to be had," Cloud said. "You have two minutes..."

Behind the marchers the avenue to retreat. Cloud turned his bullhorn to his state troopers. "Troopers, forward," he yelled. The state police came forward in a solid line. The blacks shouted for mercy; some fell to the ground; some knelt and prayed loud. Clubs flailed left and right. Heads were split; bodies were broken.

It was over in five minutes. Maj. Cloud's troopers stopped at the Selma side of the Pettus Bridge, and Clark's men drove the blacks back into "Colored Town."

John Lewis of SNCC had a fractured skull. Hosea Williams escaped with minor in-

juries. Sixteen blacks were seriously injured. Forty others were given emergency treatment at the hospital. A hundred more limped home and bound their wounds. Public reaction was instantaneous. Selma was the most publicized town on the globe.

Martin Luther King, almost inarticulate, announced that he and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy would lead another march from Selma to Montgomery.

March day was Sunday, March 21. Huge military jets landed at Craig Air Force Base across the river. Helmeted soldiers with rifles debarked. A direct hot line was established with the Pentagon in Washington.

SNCC threatened to boycott the march. They said that although their people had done all the work, Dr. Martin Luther King was proclaimed the hero of the hour. Both sides spent three days in secret caucus prior to the march.

It was almost 1 p.m. when Martin Luther King arrived with Ralph Abernathy. There were 2,800 people assembled. "Walk together, children," Dr. King shouted. "Don't you get weary, and it will lead us to the promised land. And Alabama will be a new Alabama, and America will be a new America." The local people cheered hoarsely, but many of Sel-

ma's 14,000 blacks remained home.

The marchers walked up the hump of the Pettus Bridge and down the other side. The only sign of force that could be seen were United States Army units walking along the sides of the road.

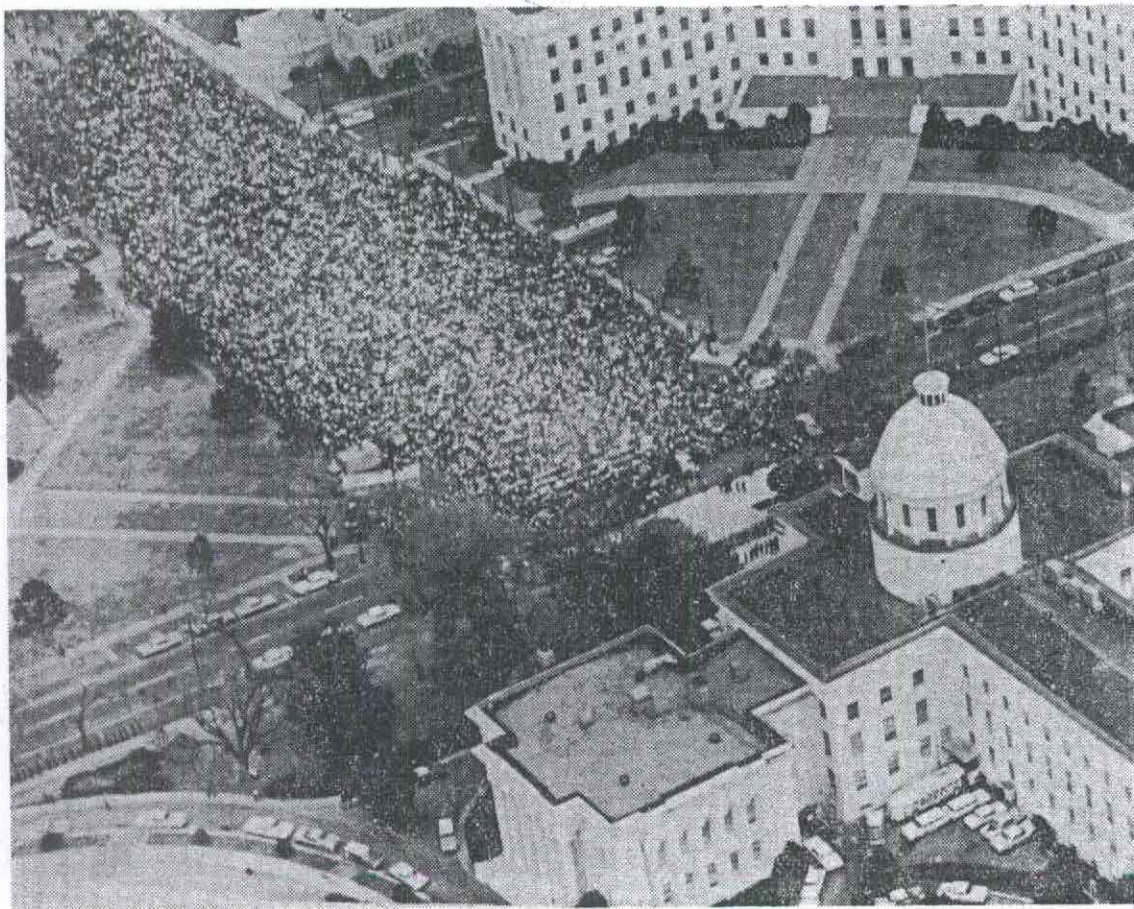
On the second day, the marchers were in Lowndes County, more firmly racist than Dallas. There were no incidents. There were fewer than 300 marchers; they were outnumbered by the soldiers.

On the third day, Martin Luther King flew to Cleveland to make a speech, and on Wednesday he and his wife flew to Montgomery to rejoin the marchers. They were a little more than ten miles from the city.

In the morning, there were 20,000 people ready to march. It was difficult to locate the few who had walked from Selma to Montgomery. There were speeches and speeches. When Martin Luther King was introduced, the crowd went wild. King had won another victory, and he left town for Atlanta within a few hours. The litter of old polemics would be swept up by others.

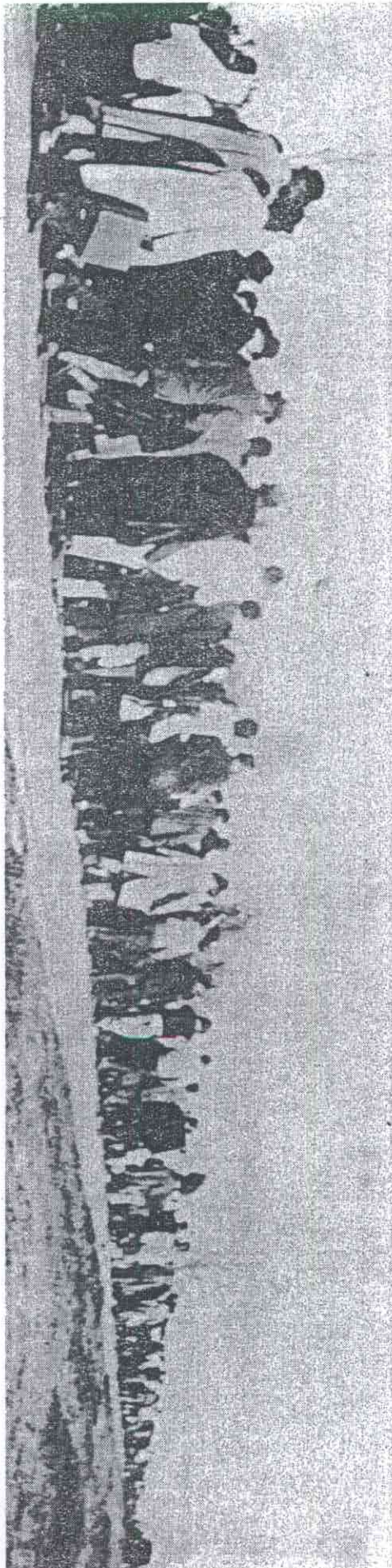
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NEXT: The Final Chapters.



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Five days and 54 miles later, the civil rights march ends at the state capitol with 30,000 persons.



An estimated 2,800 blacks led by Dr. King began a five-day, 54-mile march from Selma, Ala., to Montgomery, the state capital. In contrast with an earlier attempt, there was no police violence directed at the marchers.

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